The meeting as subjunctive form

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Abstract

Drawing on meetings within structured project environments in Turkey and Britain, this article explores how and if this kind of highly rational, instrumental meeting travels and why so much frustration is typically expressed by British participants in such meetings. Meetings held in the Turkish senior government bureaucracy did not conform to expectation: they embraced formal and informal relations and were spectacles and tournaments of skill. I suggest expectations of what constitutes a proper meeting are shaped by a specific British genealogy of common sense and technologies of fact creation, neither of which necessarily have purchase elsewhere. Nor is their applicability 'at home' straightforward, despite the fact that 'common sense' is often treated as simply commensurate with cultural systems as practical action: how one gets things done. Rather, the meeting, as shaped by this tradition, appears as a subjunctive form, a fiction of selective relationality where the meeting and project are treated as if they were set-aside spaces, participants act as if they had single formal roles cut from a web of internal and external relations and highly summarised information allows discussion towards a shared goal to take place.

Introduction

I made the mistake once of observing to a colleague (in another time and place) that the two events that created a sense of a collective, indeed an effervescence, were the weekly research seminar and a good department meeting. I have not forgotten the look of amazed contempt. The error, I think, was to make explicit that meetings *can* engender something over and above minutes unread until the next such assembly. My observation was prompted by a sense of the affect of successful meetings,

together with notes from colleagues that they had found a meeting enjoyable and/or productive; observations that were never publicly made. For if it is received wisdom that meetings are held in order to do things communally, then it is equally accepted, that meetings, particularly those in institutionalised settings, are rituals devoid of purpose. This latter view is well illustrated in Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* where days are filled by esoteric ritual signifying nothing but the status of those who maintain due form, in an isolated castle quite divorced from any connection to the world outside.

Over twenty-five years ago Schwartzman observed, 'whereas meetings appear to be everywhere, they are almost nowhere in the research literature… because meetings are so basic and pervasive … in American society that their significance as a gathering in these settings has not been recognized' (1989:4). Only now are meetings beginning to attract attention as things in themselves worthy of study. Otherwise they have typically been the background to things that pique anthropologists' interest, and though increasingly (e.g. Riles, 2006) attention has been focused on the artefacts of such key moments of social ordering and what they do, the interactions that produced them are often but etiolated traces in the documentary remains. Schwartzman juxtaposes an American grassroots organisation's meetings with political speech in traditional communities, theorising meetings as communicative events through which political relations of domination are performed. The comparison is intended to enact the customary manoevure of ethnographic defamiliarization; she quotes Marcus and Fisher (1986): 'Disruption of common sense … placing familiar subjects in unfamiliar contexts … to make the reader conscious of difference' (137). Common sense here is equated with cultural norms. I follow a different tack here, however, in exploring the meeting form.

My approach is this. A certain kind of highly-structured and structuring meeting has proved a very exportable form. Via international corporations or development agencies, 'the project' as a mechanism to order time, social actions and relations, and generate legitimate knowledge and action has taken firm hold, as Kuzmanovic (2012) describes for the NGO world in Turkey. Meetings are a vital part of such

projects to monitor progress, discuss and resolve problems. The PRINCE2 (PRoject management IN a Controlled Environment) project methodology, originally developed in 1980s' Britain, is the most successful of these structured approaches, often used for IT developments. The key element is the staging, allowing progress to be assessed at critical points and for a project to be stopped if the justification for continuing is too weak. PRINCE2 is free of content; it provides a sequence of processes, techniques (e.g. Critical Path Analysis) and documents (Strategy, Scoping, Project Initiation etc.), into which almost anything can (theoretically) be fitted.

Thus, on IT projects, data-gathering meetings are succeeded by analysis, which includes plotting relationships between data and erasing duplications. Having one instance of each datum, linked to all processes that use it, enables what is known as referential integrity in a relational database: standalone data can easily fall out of synch so that different versions of the same datum co-exist. Ideally, an organisation is similarly streamlined, each part contributing to the endeavour of the whole; there is no excess or duplication. There is a reductive elegance about a well-designed database that can panic people when they realise that informal tweaks have no place in this formal abstraction. One way round this is to regularize and include the informal. The interplay between what is formally included and informal 'workarounds' characterizes both the process of developing IT systems and project management meetings that assess progress against schedules and make formal, joint decisions.

PRINCE2 emerged at the same time as New Public Management (NPM), which was inspired by the belief that private sector methods and goals should be transplanted into what had hitherto been called public administration, in the interests of greater efficiency, which accountability and transparency were now made to serve. Hood observes this was a very Anglo Saxon vision (1991). There have been copious critiques, to which I add here, of just how useful the notion of transparency has been in the pursuit of effectiveness and efficiency. Nonetheless, these ideas continue to underpin ideas of good governance, apparently made visible through audit procedures. PRINCE2 flourished first as a mechanism for achieving the

'projectisation' of public administration itself and then as a means of managing Public Private Partnerships, which later morphed into Private Finance Initiatives (PFI). The rationale behind these partnerships is to inject private finance into large public infrastructure projects offloading set-up and operational risks onto the private sector. The benefit for the private partner is assured income. Theoretically, a sound contract overwrites tensions between long-term public good and short-term profit,[i] but PFI meetings can struggle with the notion of a common aim enabled through partnership, when public and private goals are inimical (Alexander, 2009).

Here I examine PRINCE2 meetings during a World Bank funded IT project in the Turkish Treasury partly to see if that vision travels. But this is only part of the story. There can be considerable ambivalence about the function of meetings in the very place that gave rise to them in this shape. If this is what people like to call 'anthropology at home', then this is an uncanny home indeed. The opening example shows a familiar polarity: depending on context, a common sense approach might variously take meetings to be either an efficient way of achieving things—or pointless. I suggest that part of the reason for these differences are the antecedents of the meeting form that continue to both mould and baffle anticipation; just because a form is inherited does not mean it always makes sense to its legatees. The meeting is a learned form which some play with dexterity but others regard with bemusement. I therefore also present PRINCE2 meetings in the context of a PFI project for a British Government Agency in order to explore what can happen when supposedly playing by home rules. I worked on both projects as an IT consultant who had been trained as an anthropologist.[ii] As I show below, I was not the only one occupying multiple positions.

The use of sense and common sense in the preceding paragraphs is deliberate. Geertz (1975) nailed common sense for anthropology as a cultural system determining practical action. But I suggest that recovering the 18th-century meaning of common sense[iii1,2,3] which draws on the simultaneity of individuals, roles and a collective, would enhance understanding of a culturally-specific form that has gone global and might explain why certain meetings do not run as expected; that

particular, unarticulated idea of common sense failing to find purchase. Common sense is not always synonymous with cultural systems; it is also one specific cultural system embedded in early 18th-century philosophy. The familiar phrase of a meeting's chair embarking on a summation or recommendation after discussion, 'My sense of the meeting is….' draws directly on an 18th-century inflection suggesting an empathetic capacity.

Nor is this the only assumption that partly underscores such meetings and may not be easily translated to other settings; the technologies and protocols associated with the formal production of knowledge also helps to explain why something so familiar causes so much exasperation. I am not claiming that meetings replicate laboratory protocols or rehearse Stoic philosophy, merely that these ways of ordering and understanding relationships may act as a heuristic for the meeting form.

My contention is that these kinds of meetings make, or are intended to make time and sociality through the rational choreography of co-existent temporalities, scales of activity and social relations. For the meeting, in this frame, is essentially relational. As Schwartzman notes, 'Meetings may be examined as individual or related events because what is clear from the cross-cultural literature … is that meetings always produce more meetings' (1989: 37). There is usually a pre-meeting to give legitimacy to the opening meeting. Subsequent meetings are polytemporal in their references, multi-scalar in terms of tying together broader events, working groups, tasks, sub-tasks, milestones, deliverables etc.; and recursive in the sense that pre- and post-meeting briefings rehearse the same content and form; minutes return as agenda items to later instantiations of a meeting. Social relations are nominally ordered within the space of a meeting as potentially separate elements: persons and roles are brought together and, if not fused into one voice, then into a group with a common direction. And each of these modes of being exists in relation to other roles outside the meeting space/time but still within the bounded world of 'the project'.

But that boundedness is leaky; it doesn't hold.

These structured processes, mapped out in PRINCE2 manuals and protocols, typically exist *as if* they are delimited in space and time: isolated castles. While internally relational, they ignore related events and social relations outside the world of the project, which invariably spill in. Even within the imaginary, internal, closed system there are visible and invisible, permitted and unpermitted, associations. To put it another way, the material documentary traces of meetings erase the informal, cumulative, relationships that develop around and through these projects – muddying transparency and variously acting to impede, or make possible, the agreements and outcomes that the meeting is there to generate.

Meetings perform this selective relationality through techniques of ordering events and time beyond the meeting, together with the ordering elements of a meeting itself: minutes, reports, and agendas with their commands to consider, receive, discuss, recommend, approve. In an effort to orchestrate debate further, some agendas (somewhat hopefully) attach duration to each item. Information to be discussed is filleted to digestible summaries,[iv] raising further questions about the transparency of such meetings (see also Barry, 2013). Complexity is cut to enable orderly progress; the tension between the selective 'as if' and the infinite 'is' perhaps contributes to familiar frustrations with meetings. The meeting, in these contexts, takes a subjunctive form, which eclipses the relations that variously enable or frustrate the form.

PRINCE goes international

Under Turgut Özal's premiership in the 1980s, Turkey embraced economic liberalization. But, from being the 'darling of the [World] Bank' (Kavalsky 2006:7) in the late 1980s, Turkey's political instability, caused by successive different coalitions, high inflation, economic crises and internal war, meant that by 1993, 'the Turkey portfolio was considered the [World Bank's] weakest' (ibid) requiring tighter fiscal management to support broader structural adjustments. An improved macroeconomic database was seen as essential for the Treasury's economic data analysis, enhancing the NPM virtue of increased transparency underpinning rational

management. The IT project was intended both to enable good governance and operate as an example.[v] The British company, which won the contract, specified PRINCE2 as their way of meeting this latter condition.

As an employee of the company, I spent 18 months over a two-year period in the Turkish Treasury, joined by analyst or economist colleagues for different phases. The Turkish state bureaucracy at this time had a series of specific features (Alexander 2002). First, it was politicized in the sense that each successive political coalition brought in a wholesale change to senior civil servants. Second, in order to cut through a complex and often sclerotic bureaucracy, Özal had introduced what was almost a privileged parallel structure of bright young things well versed in the latest economic and management theories. These officials were nicknamed Özal's little princes (or princesses) by disgruntled colleagues. The rapidity with which senior officials were replaced meant that many of the Treasury's staff were young and, whether or not they were little princes, in the absence of experienced colleagues in their economic area, they would constantly consult the university professors who had taught them on their undergraduate degrees.

We were given an office in the IT Department but reported to Emine, the formidable Director General (DG) of Economic Research who lost her job, shortly after the project described below, when the Minister of Economy changed. In line with PRINCE2 protocols, we started by drawing up a Gantt chart, or workflow schedule. This shows graphically, first, elapsed and actual time for the whole project plus each task within it, second relationships between tasks and, third, 'dependencies' or which task must follow which, and which can run in parallel. Other Gantt chart elements are key deliverables from each task with deadlines and 'milestones', often tied to payments and marked by high-level project meetings.

The Gantt chart was devised in 1910-1915 by Henry Gantt an American mechanical engineer, following the *harmonogram*, invented in 1896 by Karol Adamiecki, a Polish economist, engineer and early management theorist (Marsh, 1975). These revolutionary ways of bringing together different elements of large, complex

processes were contemporary with Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911); indeed Taylor and Gantt worked together in 1887 for two large steel producers (the Midvale and Bethlehem Steel corporations) applying those very scientific management principles. Gantt (1911) emphasized that management's role was to remove interferences from smoothly running processes; as with PRINCE2 the emphasis is on a controlled environment. All three men were engineers who sought methods of disembedding and transferring systems control technology from mechanical production to any environment.[vi] These are, typically, the schedules that are reported against at progress meetings as well as milestone meetings.

The Gantt chart also plotted out data gathering meetings with Treasury officials, according to a list of interviewees agreed with our client, Emine, who was, in turn, accountable to the World Bank. Each meeting, according to our conventional practice, had a previously circulated and agreed agenda identifying what was to be discussed. Later, we would turn extensive notes into an abstract map of Treasury data and processes. But repeatedly, to our consternation, we found that familiar methods implicitly based on assumptions of a particular kind of community and shared intentionality within a bounded project world just didn't work.

For example, the idea of an organisation performing collectively towards a common goal stood little scrutiny.[vii] Publishing given datasets gave considerable prestige to a DG. Several Directorates might publish the same variables but with different values and analyses – precisely what a rationalized database will not allow. But no-one would relinquish their perceived ownership of the data. Bringing different DGs together in a meeting generated silence or agreement that (we were told later) was given in such a form as to indicate profound disagreement. It took us a long time to be able to read the no in smiling agreement, usually indicated by a qualifier: 'Yes, of course. Although you must be aware that…'. Competition within institutions is *not* a Turkish peculiarity (Alexander, 2001) it should be noted; NPM 'internal markets' can add a further mode of division between departments. Resolution happened off-stage through Emine's cajoling or threats.

By the same token, our meetings to confirm common understandings after separate interviews often failed. We had yet to learn it was outrageously impolite for junior staff to speak in front of their peers or bosses. As a result, DGs were the most voluble, but not always the most knowledgeable. Unequal statuses outside meeting spaces persisted within. Refining understanding of data and processes therefore had to be sought outside gatherings, which generated very different kinds of meetings from those where different voices and opinions are sought en route to devising appropriate actions.

The familiar to and fro of question, answer and discussion was not only disrupted by hierarchies and rivalry enacted within the meeting space but by an explicit delight in game playing and performance. Thus, needing confirmation or otherwise that we had understood something correctly, we contacted Adem, the Research Officer who had originally given us the information. He prevaricated. He was busy. He could meet us but was unlikely to be able to help us. We set up a meeting. He took us to the corner of an open plan office testily repeating that we could try but he didn't know. People gathered round, grinning. We all knew he knew. He did not feel inclined to help – and demonstrated this, crossing his arms and leaning his chair back. The crowd watched as we went to and fro. Some, slightly bored, began to play cards at the back of the crowd, looking up and listening occasionally. We tried again.

'We'd like to ask you something quite important,',
'Go on then,' he said, smiling.
'But we can't, the question is too complex, too big.'
'Try'.
'We can't because it won't make sense on its own without context … We need other questions for that.'
'Then try.'
We rattled off questions. He answered quickly.
'And the big question?' he said.
We looked at each other. The silence elongated and spread through the crowd.

'There is no question is there?' he said. And he laughed. 'Now,' he beamed, 'you're thinking like a Turk!'

The audience clapped and after this there were only cordial discussions with this Department. Here the finesse with which the game was played was foregrounded. This was trial by performance evoking perhaps the improvisational competitions (*aitys*) between Kazakh bards (*akyn*) (Dubuisson, 2013) or Sumatran poetic duels that perform political tensions through public dialogic exchange (Bowen, 1989). Here, to quote Appadurai (1986) on tournaments of value, 'strategic skill [was] culturally measured by the success with which actors attempt diversions or subversions of culturally conventionalised paths for the flow of things' (ibid: 21). While Adem's subversion had more to do with disrupting expected norms and forms than material objects, the explicit recognition of ingenuity still made this a contest. The 'special arena' Appadurai (ibid) deems necessary for such tournaments, was constituted by the audience. Again, dexterous manipulation of meeting forms is scarcely a Turkish phenomenon, but rarely so evident.

The notes from this meeting, in the form of minutes, simply recorded information given, by whom and when. Other meetings' minutes were similarly sparse. It was as if the various diversions, longeurs and confusions had never happened; they were simply evacuated from the record. Minutes are notes and actions typically for attendees, often also taken to higher-level meetings to evidence progress. As such they may be classed as a kind of literary technology of proliferation bearing virtual witness, and allowing witness to be borne to the acts done in a given meeting. The reductiveness of these minutes indexed an ideal form where people come together simply to propel something forward through discussion.

Meetings also took place with external government agencies with whom the Treasury shared data. These were tricky connections to bring within the confines of a project schedule that crisply itemized and allocated duration to a sequence of phases, as though the environment it referenced were indeed controlled. It was at these meetings with senior colleagues in and outside the Treasury that the dexterity

of Emine and her Deputy, Ercan, became apparent. Both had spent many years seconded to the World Bank in Washington and, while they privately complained how hard it was to get things done in Turkey, both were skilled operators with Turkish and foreign colleagues alike, constantly comparing and commenting on how things were done in Turkey, the States and Europe.

Indeed, as Ercan and I were travelling one evening to a meeting with the Central Bank's Deputy Director to agree data formats, Ercan wryly (and entirely accurately) described what would happen:

> 'He'll welcome us, offer coffee, cigarettes, and chocolate. We'll be taken to admire their mainframe computer then we'll chat about nothing. After which, he will regretfully say he wished he could help us but it is out of his hands. And then we'll leave. And we'll go through this because we are oriental.'

This was neither the first nor the last time Ercan deployed the trope of Orientalism, placing himself simultaneously within his mocking 'we are oriental' (he wore a knowing grin) and outside as a commentator who would use such a word. Ercan invited ironic comparison between how such meetings might be seen by an outsider as a pointless exercise, and how things actually operated. And by his grin he acknowledged that he alone could occupy the double position of distance and partiality. This meeting failed as a transparent outcome-generating procedure; it worked to maintain relatively harmonious operational alliances while relations between the Ministers of each institution were less than cordial. Data protocols were quietly agreed the following month.

Meetings with the World Bank and senior Treasury officials to assess progress at key junctures or make significant decisions, brought together multiple understandings of what the meeting form was for, and how to achieve the 'outcome' that the Gantt chart and agenda indicated was the reason for gathering. Their significance was marked by holding them in Emine's vast room, which signaled her

status and closeness to the Minister of the Economy, and by the retinue of junior staff brought by each senior official. One such meeting was to discuss the British analysts' interim report on hardware and software options with Treasury and World Bank representatives. The agenda set out the order of items. At Emine's table sat her Deputies, senior Treasury DGs, the World Bank project management team and us, surrounded by junior staff.

Ercan had met us in our hotel the night before to discuss how to play the meeting. We later learned he had also talked to the World Bank funders the same evening; we promptly set up another bilateral meeting with the World Bank. The meeting was punctuated by knowing looks between each party referencing their particular extra-camera meeting yet acting, at least for the British and north American participants, as though it had no place in the present discussion.

About forty people were watching the meeting, some catching up with each other in hissed whispers that became louder as the meeting lost interest. Mini meetings sprouted around the room. Some came and went. Some conferred with their bosses at the table in stage whispers. Coffee boys delivered orders. Occasionally, Emine would theatrically clutch at her heart, exclaiming her blood pressure was rising to dangerous levels. This was usually a prelude to instructing the audience to be quiet or for a break to restore a propriety more familiar to the World Bank. Such unminuted black holes were familiar from British meetings when angry exchanges, heated discussions or helpless laughter would surge above the order of the meeting but be lost to the formal record.

The project's internal and external worlds were brought together in other ways. Emphasising an option that met the Treasury's processing requirements, an analyst observed that a car should not be bought if only a bicycle were needed. The Banking DG's response was that a car was necessary as Ankara was hilly. While apparently a literal response to a metaphor, the comment also had metaphorical intent. While financial prudence indicated less hardware capacity, the Treasury's status among

senior government ministries would be enhanced by extensive processing power. A willing funder only needed convincing.

Thus, despite, or because of, the many pre-meets, the meeting had no unified aim. Emine announced the final decision via telephone calls, after further informal, bilateral meetings. None of the documents provided for, or produced after these Treasury meetings indicated the shifting relationships between the British Company, the World Bank and the Treasury, nor between Emine, her colleagues and subordinates, nor, indeed, between the Minister of Economy and the Heads of other government organizations, all of which had a profound bearing on whether the project would work at all. This was far from being a controlled environment.

Where a NPM frame might applaud the entrepreneurial individual for getting things done (the 'can do, will do attitude') without recourse to formal meetings, in the Treasury, formal and informal went hand-in-hand: spectacle was a necessary corollary. Far from being a fiasco, the meeting had been part of the process, providing internal exhibitions of status and relations and external demonstrations of well-run meetings – when matters were hauled back to more recognizable forms. Further, by making explicit relations beyond roles in the meeting, it emphasized the common confusion in British meetings, which are enacted both as if only formal, professional roles matter within a set-aside space and, implicitly, that external and internal relations *do* inform meetings.

In the Treasury the rational, ordering form of a meeting did not hold, nor was much store set by the performative technologies of a formal meeting. If a DG wanted to find out what had happened in a meeting, they spoke directly to someone who had been present, rather than refer to minutes. Facts and knowledge did not have to be ritually witnessed in such a forum and formally inscribed. Far from acting as though the meeting were a set-aside space, formal and informal were integrated in a form that acknowledged hierarchies, external events and politics.

There are echoes with Simpson's (2013) account of NGOs' attempts to bring people together after a disaster in Gujarat into non-hierarchical meetings to discuss what to do. Meetings were renamed 'groups' and were rapidly mocked by participants precisely because they ignored social hierarchies that shaped the 'groups'. He describes how 'groups' became a farcial pastime and source of entertainment': 'we're going to do groups'. The comedy or 'surreal befuddlement' was the pretence that actual social organisation, prior relationships and histories were ignored.

Our initial bewilderment lay in the difficulty in recognizing how decisions were being reached or what was being communicated. Treasury meetings seemed to fly in the face of a common sense way of doing business efficiently and effectively.

And yet that shared unity of purpose does not always have purchase in a British setting.

PRINCE at home

Dewey (1998: 381) notes two distinct though related meanings for common sense. The first, drawing on the Oxford English Dictionary's definition suggests 'good, sound practical sense … readiness in dealing with the ordinary affairs of life'. The second meaning refers to both the general feeling of community and accepted (regulative and normative) meanings within a community (ibid). Both traditions speak so closely to anthropology that it seems they have often simply disappeared. Common sense has become nothing but common sense, so obvious it is not extraordinary (see also Crehan, 2011); indeed, in Herzfeld's much quoted phrase, 'cultural anthropology is the comparative study of common sense … unstated assumptions we share with others in our community' (2001: 1). Thus the typical anthropological take is that while common sense appears to be somehow universal to humanity, or at any rate apparently 'natural' (Geertz, 1983: 85) as 'its tenets are immediate deliverances of experience' (ibid: 83) it is in fact culturally specific. Strathern takes this a step further discussing how, in contemporary Britain, the

'normal' is naturalized and a version of nature normalized into common sense (1992); 'nature' becomes the unquestioned cultural system, in other words.

Dewey's distinctions are useful in the context of meetings: he links his former meaning to 'judging the significance of things and events with reference to what should be done; the other in the ideas that are used to direct and justify activities and judgments' (1998: 381). Meetings that assess actions and events on the basis of reports and devise actions in response, draw on both these kinds of common sense. But the second meaning contains more shades still. The notion of commonly-held beliefs and meanings appears, somewhat reified, in Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart's Scottish common sense philosophy, as the highest authority, and again, with less reverence, in Gramsci's take on common sense. For Gramsci, the Italian *senso comune*, 'the traditional popular conception of the world' (1971: 199) is a heterogeneous jumble (Crehan, 2011: 281) that is at once conservative, carries seeds of its transformation and is profoundly unsystematic (2011: 282).

I suggest the legacies of 18th-century common sense philosophy continue to shape the meeting form. The *sensus communis* was celebrated by Reid, Douglas and the Earl of Shaftesbury in a clear political stand against absolutist tradition linking freedom and the voice of citizens; here it was the empathetic link between person and community, or public spirit. This was about the human ability to 'develop civic virtue through… discovering shared understanding' (Peters Agnew, 2008: 55). Thomas Paine's (1776) pamphlet *Common Sense* emphasised the virtues of simple language and reasoning in discussing the relationship between individuals and large, complex societies: where to find 'the common' in societies that had ceased to be face-to-face.[viii] Common sense realism is thus 'the epistemological frame of modern democratic politics… the capacity of the public to distinguish facts from fictions constituted the epistemological rationale for empowering democratic citizens and the decentralisation of political power' (Ezrahi, 2008: 49). This is the language of the French and American Revolutions; it is also the rhetoric of neo-liberalism, coterminous with PRINCE2.[ix] Meetings in this frame are egalitarian, comprising plain-speaking, ordinary people. As the Turkish example indicates, this

epistemological scaffold does not travel easily. The rhetoric also often fails to persuade closer to home, but still the idea holds that this is how meetings *ought* to be conducted.

Another meaning shadows 'sense'; its roots in old High German and Old English indicate direction, purpose, journeying. The Proto Indo European root *sent- means 'to go'. The French *bon sens*, for common sense, also signifies 'direction'. This kind of gathering of people with a shared direction is something very different from a research symposium or seminar; the forward, purposeful focus translates easily into NPM style meetings. It certainly allows for a rational, staged, goal-driven trajectory quite in line with both Enlightenment ideas of ordered progress and the phased structure of PRINCE2 punctuated by progress meetings; indeed Van Vree defines the modern meeting as 'gathering together … to talk and come to a decision about a common future' (2011). But where meetings are the site of performance, there may be either not so much progress of an agreed goal as the affirmation and reconstitution of community, as Myers (1988) suggests for the Pintupi and the meeting with the Central Bank demonstrated, or spectacle, or arena for demonstrating skill and status.

It might be expected that British meetings would show closer alignment to this model of common sense, remembering the genealogy of NPM and the technologies it spawned. However, while PFI meetings presupposed a shared goal, rather hopefully expressed as 'partnership', the project was riven by incommensurate aims: maximizing profit for the Developer but long-term utility and staff 'buy-in' for the Agency CEO. The freelance project managers working on behalf of the Agency, wanted work done well, fast and cheaply: their reputation and future jobs were at stake. Performances might therefore also be used to halt progress in the perceived wrong direction, disturbing the meeting to dramatic effect: an effect only achieved if the participants first share a sense of the proper form.

Thus although meetings followed a previously agreed agenda, the chair orchestrating formal discussion, most participants knew that formal meetings could

be a gladiatorial arena where bluster and mockery could trip up 'opponents' into revealing poor work in public before senior government officials. These subversionary devices worked through the form, rather than round it as in the Treasury. Providing the technologies of fact creation were in place (the meeting had been 'called': i.e. named as such, there was an agenda, and quoracy to guarantee representation from all sides and witnesses), the PFI meeting space carried more revelatory heft and drama than in the Treasury. This, despite the occasional overt theatricality in Treasury meetings, and the apparently punctilious politesse of Agency proceedings. The Agency had its own meticulous Writing Guide, including agendas and minutes, both circulated via what is known as a "Loose Minute", a precisely structured note short of a formal letter. The Guide emphasizes courtesy.

There were certain points in the lifecycle of this project when the parties' different aims were vividly foregrounded. Thus early meetings to define complex contracts, against which progress would subsequently be assessed, were tense between potential developers, and project managers. Acknowledging the potency of the semi-public space of the meeting, the trick was to lure the other side into saying something that would then constitute an agreement, or into revealing knowledge that could only then be used in shaping respective obligations, even if known informally before. Each negotiation meeting was preceded by briefings within each group determining how to 'play' the meeting, followed by debriefings to analyse the meeting and, on occasion, interruptions to the meetings themselves when one group needed to restore its own sense of purpose.

Paul, former civil servant, now consultant and lead negotiator used to explain to his team the necessity of 'holding the line' or 'keeping the ball in the air' during meetings, supporting colleagues in public, whatever confusions might emerge. As one meeting dragged on with a potential American developer, Paul began to draw them into a deal that would tie them to a clear costing mechanism for future work. The American lawyer suddenly shouted, 'Whoa guys! We're entering a low pressure area!' Confusion (including the supplier). The lawyer explained, 'It sucks!' Paul called 'Time!' making a T shape with his hands. We ran into the corridor, Paul

hissing, 'What on *earth* is going on?' The other team emerged to have their own huddle clarifying their position before the meeting resumed. Time out was literally an unminuted interval.

As the project moved through PRINCE2 stages, relationships of antipathy or warmth developed within and between teams. But these biographies of meetings had no lasting trace in the escalating pile of documents that went into meetings or minutes that emerged from them, even though, as participants knew, an angry exchange at one meeting, or in external encounters could result in a highly-charged atmosphere the next time. Just as Treasury minutes were emptied of interactions beyond decisions and noted information, so these PFI minutes extracted humour and anger from events, producing only a laconic record that bore witness to due process – often teleologically referencing a possible future audit. Indeed, just as written actions were often ascribed not to people but the organizations they represented so, on occasion, would the formality be heightened by individuals being addressed in meetings explicitly as their organisation's voice: 'What does the Agency consider to be the best way forward?'

Skilled in the arts of formal meetings, Paul was also adept at puncturing the form to foreground or provoke what might otherwise be obscured by careful choreography. Having heard informally that Charles and Simon, two Developers, were ignoring Agency staff's concerns, Paul would nettle them in the hope they might inadvertently reveal something that could be captured in formal progress meeting, hoping to draw attention to where observance of the form betrayed the project's nominal purpose. In response to their misleading summaries of staff consultations, Paul would mildly reply, 'well of course you're right, Charlie,' or 'it's very simple, Simon…'. Irritated responses were followed by a lengthy discussion of what could or could not be recorded: 'minute that, would you please?', or 'strike! strike!' As much time could be spent deciding what would be minuted or not as on substantive discussion. As in the Turkish Treasury, high-level meetings were frequently attended by large numbers on both sides, but this was typically deployed as an intimidatory tactic.

Great care was taken to appear to follow due form, partly because of the power it held to ratify and reveal, partly to avoid challenge from the 'other side'. Thus, in order to maintain outer propriety, coded language arose within the world of the project, a common phenomenon in any institution. Thus 'I was rather surprised to note x or y' was a furious request to explain an event. Paul laughingly detailed the gradations implicit in declaring 'concern' over inadequate progress, to 'serious concern' and finally 'grave concern'. This last indicated that the Agency head was likely to be warned of poor work. Such codes within the project's world, and again within each group, were arguably at odds with the idea of a transparent language for the common person.

Again, echoing Ercan's distancing move, Paul would occasionally try to halt particular decisions by saying to either the Agency (his employer) or the Developer, 'As a *tax payer*, I am seriously concerned …', deftly rearranging relations of accountability, restoring the multiple contradictory relations and roles each person held and recalibrating direction. Such interventions deliberately ruptured formality, highlighting dissonances between external complexity and internal assumptions around singular roles and the set-apart space of meetings.

Two traditions are at play in granting legitimacy to who is entitled to speak, make representation, and assent to facts. Van Vree describes the 'meeting class' of the Dutch Republic, an elite defined by its ability to participate correctly in such gatherings (2011). This league of gentlemen is quite different from the community of plain-speaking people to whom Paine addressed himself in plain tongue; one is bound together by markers of distinction, the other by empathy. These contradictory legacies of the right of members of a gathering to speak, note and contribute indicate the multiplicity of persons, or, one might say hats, co-existing in a meeting: persons there by right of a role (who may well have other roles), by right of membership of a given project or community, represented by that meeting, who speak as a person with a life beyond the role, and as their role(s) (the hats). This plethora of personae being simultaneously inhabited may partly account for

confusions around the meeting table ('which hat are you speaking with now?') and tensions over whether all members' speech is equally valid.[x] Summoning the notion that everyone present was accountable to tax-paying citizens, brought in quite a different public, a different logic of representation and legitimacy, and gave Paul a different voice and relation to those present and those beyond the room.

Paul's manoevures also challenged the formal time/space of the meeting. Almost like a laboratory, meetings are set up as a defined, separate space (identified on both the agenda and the minutes), selecting phenomena from the project's world, but standing outside in order to contemplate and act on selected elements. But as countless studies of laboratory science (e.g. Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Traweek, 1998) have shown, far from being a white-coated retreat in contemplation of the natural world, labs are as overflowing with complex human relationships and politics as anywhere else, both within a given laboratory community and shaping external political forces. And this is my point with project meetings. Seligman et al. argue that ritualized frames for actions create a shared 'subjunctive ... 'as if' or 'could be' universe' (2008: 7-8; 17-42). The potency of ritual is shared by that form of the meeting that is 'called' into being. Thus meetings are taken *as if* they were set-aside places outside time for the purposes of ordering and making time; members are supposed to act *as if* they were one part of an equal meeting membership, as if they were representative roles, with no other connection; material and literary technologies, to kidnap a phrase, display meetings *as if* they were abstract, logically-ordered, dispassionate events. This is a subjunctive aesthetic; the meeting is a subjunctive form.

The fact of sociality within and beyond the meeting room, of ruptures to orderliness, of uncontained inflowing external relations, of rancour and humour always seems to come as a surprise to those less adept at playing through the form.

British meetings that rigidly exclude the informal are more likely to provoke exasperation among participants attempting to enact the selective relationality demanded by the subjunctive form: as if prior relationships between participants do

not exist, as if the meeting space is framed and held by its technologies of knowledge production, as if times, spaces, events and relations external to the meeting technologies affect neither discussion nor decision; as if singularity and coherence of purpose unite people and practice.

A comparative coda

This has also been an exercise in comparison. The very notion of a special issue suggests meetings are a sufficiently common ethnographic category to allow instances to be examined side by side, what Candea calls 'lateral comparison' (2016). The form of the two case studies presented here invites comparison, although more of the implied 'west'/home versus 'other' variety. But that is not my intention. I have instead considered how each instance compares against an abstract model, the very existence of which assumes comparison is possible, that there is a common essence to these events, which allows discrete instances to be marshaled into a single frame. The possibility of comparison is embedded in the globalization of certain ways of 'doing meetings', the idea that they can be enacted in the same way, to the same effect each time.

I have suggested, however, that the formal meeting has been shaped by assumptions now partly out of time and often out of place. Nevertheless, it can carry a certain legitimizing ritual power, in some contexts, to what is said and done. Skilful players can subvert the form in different ways using the public setting and formal legitimacy to give informal knowledge the weight and potency of revelation, juxtaposing and comparing formally-presented documents with alternative or fuller accounts from which they were extracted. Notable in both cases was the strategic use of self-reflection and assertion of different, sometimes contradictory roles and affiliations in order to provide an external point from which comparative critique could be made – and the disjuncture foregrounded between inflowing externalities and complexity and the subjunctive form of the set-aside space where unity, democractic deliberation and orderly progression are enacted. Even if I have not intended a west/other comparison, Ercan, mockingly, placed it centre stage.

The implied abstraction of the meeting form obscures its genealogy: the content of the form is specific. Where a west/other comparison mediated by common characteristics might be expected, a form appears instead that is a necessarily incomplete rendering down of external complexity, and often deployed to ends quite different from those on the nominal agenda. Informants move in and out of subjunctive meeting frames, to ensure progress happens, either physically walking outside a room or by indicating what is and is not to be recorded, by switching roles, joking, using subtexts and drawing the outside in. Thus the trust in form and the apparent transparency that brings, as legacies from a particular kind of emergent public, is variously traduced and bolstered by the amplitude of relations, activities and documents that surround and invade the leaky worlds of project meetings.

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[i] These partnerships have been criticized for merely delaying or hiding public sector debt, increasing infrastructural cost (Gaffney and Pollock 1999) and creating a contractual lock-in to a single supplier (e.g. Lonsdale, 2005).

[ii] I worked on these projects as a consultant before, during and after training as an anthropologist, continuing to reflect on these Treasury experiences with informants the following year during fieldwork in other Turkish institutions. All such projects included long reflections with colleagues on meetings and the broader success or not of these abstract forms that inhibited some actions and demanded others. I kept copious notes as the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) representative on this PFI project was interested in a research project, once I returned to academia, into why so many IT projects fail. The OGC used to sponsor best practice in procurement. It was closed in 2011.

[iii] The thought, as with so many, was sparked by a comment made by Keith Hart.

[iv] Junior civil service staff usually prepare briefing notes for senior meeting discussions or indicate to their bosses, through red tabs inserted into large documents, where the key items are to be found. The power to determine what is and is not made formally visible thus often rests with junior staff.

[v] Although this macroeconomic database project happened in 1993, the same projects continue to be funded by the World Bank.

[vi] Akin notes that Gantt sought to take rational managerialism far further than Taylor, setting up a political organisation in 1916, the New Machine, which aimed to bring harmonious efficiency to social and political life as much as industry in the interests of 'true democracy' (1977: 52).

[vii] This was exacerbated occasional by different economics professors having different views on how best to approach economic definitions and management. Thus, the State Planning Organisation and the State Institute of Statistics, favoured different baskets of items for calculating the Consumer Price Index. In turn, depending on affiliations, loyalties and networks often forged at University, different Treasury officials would use different CPIs for calculations.

[viii] Paine does not of course base his reasoning on common sense as common usage or universal consent.

[ix] While Hannah Arendt thought the failure to cultivate common sense as found in New England town meetings might explain why democracy had not prevented 20th century totalitarianism, Rosenfeld (2011) notes that, in contemporary politics, appeals to common sense are mainly made by right wing politicians.

[x] Specialist knowledge might be via additional invited members of a meeting, noted as being 'in attendance' and who typically have fewer rights to engage in meetings through discussion and decision.